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ABSTRACT

Deviation for native-speaker norms in non-native varieties of English are often regarded as interlanguage features which must either be weeded out through teaching or which the learner will eventually abandon as his competency moves in the direction of the target language. It is argued in this paper that some deviations are motivated by style, even though they may reflect first language-influence. To support this argument the language of university students in Ghana was analyzed with emphasis on instances of coordination which break grammatical rules. The conclusion reached is that coordination is not an interlanguage feature in Ghanaian English, but rather different types of coordination are used to signal varying levels of formality in social interaction. This paper goes on to draw some implications of this conclusion. (Contains 18 references.) (Author)

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IS IT OR IS IT NOT INTERLANGUAGE? A HEAD-ON CONFRONTATION WITH NON-NATIVE ENGLISH

L. K. Owusu-Ansah (DAL)

Abstract

Deviation from native-speaker norms in non-native varieties of English (NNE) are often regarded as interlanguage features which must either be weeded out through teaching or which the learner will eventually abandon as his competency moves in the direction of the target language. It is argued in this paper that some deviations are motivated by style, even though they may reflect first language-influence. To support this argument the language of university students in Ghana was analysed with emphasis on instances of coordination which break grammatical rules. The conclusion reached is that coordination is not an interlanguage feature in Ghanaian English, but rather different types of coordination are used to signal varying levels of formality in social interaction. The paper goes on to draw some implications of this conclusion.

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1 Introduction

Most of us working on non-native varieties of English (NNE) can remember at least one occasion on which we have been asked: How can you be sure that what you're looking at isn't an interlanguage phenomenon? In the heyday of error and contrastive analyses concern over treating NNE as varieties in their own right was expressed more directly, for example:

> On the large issues [Sey] is not silent, but wisely tentative, modestly refuting only those who have wished to rush too hastily to judgement ... and doubting the overhasty elevation of deviation through error into the dignity of Ghanaianisms.
>
> (Spencer, Foreword to Sey, 1973: x)

One way of answering this question is to provide details about one's informants and the circumstances in which the English language is used. For Ghanaian English, which is my primary interest, the catalogue includes the fact that English has been used in Ghana for over three hundred years, that it is used for both internal and external purposes, and that it is a taught subject as well as a medium of instruction from primary school upwards. My particular informants, who are university students, have been using English for at least fifteen years and have achieved credit in the GCE Ordinary Level Examinations administered by the West African Examinations Council.

One gets the impression that, even though this is a good attempt at answering the question, it does not actually address the central issue, which is about the language and not the users. In effect, the question can be rephrased as: What is there in the language

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to support the claim that it is a stable rather than an interlanguage variety? Asking the question in this form challenges one to focus attention on the language.

Without diminishing the importance of information about the user, this paper seeks to tackle the issue of whether NNEs are interlanguage varieties or not from the point of view of the form and function of the English language as used in Ghana. Though the discussion will be based on observations about how the language is used in one country, much of it has wider application.

2. Interlanguage models and variation

Two main approaches to interlanguage can be identified, namely (a) rationalist, also referred to as the Homogeneous Competence Paradigm, and (b) variationist or variabilist model (Gregg 1990). The first of these relies heavily on the theories of the generative-transformational school of linguistics and in particular maintains a fine distinction between competence and performance. Researchers within this tradition see interlanguage as a homogeneous phenomenon and treat observed variation as features of performance, not significant, on the whole, for theory construction.

The variationist model, on the other hand, does not accept the competence-performance dichotomy without question. As 'variation' implies, researchers within this framework make variation a central component of their theory of second language acquisition (Ellis 1990, Tarone 1990). This means that second language is "studied in social context" (Tarone 1990: 394).

Despite the efforts of the variationists, the views of the rationalist school are still widely accepted and occur frequently in discussion of NNEs. Hence the need to pose the initial question. Although the title of this paper creates the impression that there is a clear-cut answer, it has to be admitted that NNEs are not uniform varieties. The term 'variety' refers to a way of speaking and writing (English) associated with a group of people or geo-political area in terms of its form and functions, as well as the historical development of the language. Variation in one form or another is an important characteristic of any variety, whether native or non-native.

Taking Ghanaian English (GE) for example, it exhibits two forms of variation: (a) situational vaiation and (b) errors. The first is due to demands of style and register, and the second to slips and an inadequate grasp of the grammar of English. The distinction between the two types of variation is not as clear- cut as it is often thought. This indeterminacy underscores the need to ask our question, since aspects of a variety can profitably be studied under the rubric of interlanguage, though others may not.

It is argued in this paper that the question can be answered adequately only in relation to the use of the language by a small, close-knit group. This is not admitting the speaker through the backdoor; rather it ensures that one does not resort to too many exceptions in accounting for deviations from an established pattern. For this reason, I propose to answer the question using data provided by university students in Ghana.

3. The problem

The issue at stake is how to account for coordination in Ghanaian English. In this variety two types of coordination can be observed. The first type, referred to in this paper as "normal coordination", conforms to the rules of grammar which may be summarised as follows:

(a) Coordination in English involves similar grammatical elements, e.g. noun + noun, verb + verb, adjective + adjective.

(b) Coordination involves elements of equal grammatical rank, e.g. morpheme + morpheme, word + word, group + group, clause + clause. (See Huddleston 1984, Quirk and Greenbaum 1973).

The second type of coordination occurring in Ghanaian English does not obey the rules described above. Such constructions are therefore referred to as "odd couples". They will be illustrated presently, but since odd couples occur in native English too, a few examples may prove illuminating at this stage.

1. Are you coming or what?

2. He must be crazy or something.

3. The computer room is full of floppy discs, manuals, printers and what have you/ and what not/ and so on.

These examples are "odd" not because they are not acceptable, for that is clearly not the case; but because they do not appear to obey the rules presented in reference books.

4. The data

The data from which the odd and normal couples are drawn were provided by university students for a study into formality in Ghanaian English. They were collected in recent fieldwork, though some of the written texts had been produced earlier. The language samples used are authentic in that they had been produced to meet a communication need and therefore reflect actual usage rather than the language of role play.

For the purpose of investigating the types and distribution of coordination in the English spoken and written by the informants, personal letters, non-personal letters, academic essays and resolutions were looked at. Some of the findings are presented below. As expected the coordinations range from normal through various degrees of oddness.

4. It was good to be back in school. I had missed a lot of my friends and we spent lots of time chatting. [From a personal letter].

5. I was really tired and since I planned leaving early in the morning I thought it best to catch some sleep early. [From a personal letter].

6. The daily attendance at the hospital and the severity of the pain in the eye have prevented me from attending lectures. [From a letter to the Hall Warden].

7. Realising that the administration has maintained a communication gap with reference to the commercialisation and privatisation of certain infrastructure and facilities on campus, Do hereby resolve and be it irrevocably, immutably and unequivocably resolved that ... [From a resolution].

8. What do you think it will be? Would it be precious stone, would it be clay or rock? [From a religious testimony]

9. But this is all you've done or you've got a lot. [From a conversation between two friends].

10. When are you going to finish your course? and (sic) when are do you intend to come down immediately? [From a personal letter].

11. You always spell my name [Mensah] without the 'h'. Is it an oversight or the name is too long? [From a personal letter].

12. I mean is Scotland part of Great Britain? Is it in England or it is a different country? [From a personal letter].

13. Did you stay on campus for the Easter break or all the pals went home. [From a personal letter].

14. Do you like the semester system or you would have preferred the terms? [From a personal letter].

15. Was it just random sampling or you planned it? [From a personal letter].

5. Discussion

From the examples cited above it is obvious that the informants have no difficulty in constructing normal coordinations at different grammatical levels, i.e. word, group and clause. In (4), for instance, the coordination is between *I was really tired* and *I thought it best to catch some sleep early*. The presence of the intervening clause, *since I planned leaving early*, does not present any problems for the writer. In fact examples (6) and (7) show even greater sophistication. A perfect balance can be observed in *the daily attendance at the hospital and the severity of the pain in the eye*, while (7) illustrates four types of coordination in what is only part of an orthographic sentence. These are:

(a) noun + noun: *commercialisation and privatisation*

(b) noun group + noun group: *certain infrastructure and facilities on campus*

(c) adverb + adverb: *immutably and unequivocably*

(d) clause + clause: *Do hereby resolve and be it --- resolved.*

It can thus be concluded that coordination does not constitute an interlanguage problem for the informants. However, this conclusion need to be justified in the light of examples (9-15), all of which are odd in one way or another.

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5.1 What makes a couple odd

The couples in (9-15) appear odd for different reasons. Since they are isolated from the original context of situation in which they were used, some explanation is called for.

Example (9) is taken from a conversation between two friends about a product one of them has invented. In the context in which it is uttered it functions as a question but contrary to the practice in native English, both clauses have falling rather than rising intonation. The first clause appears to carry a challenge which is mitigated in the second. The conjunction or, therefore, carries a different semantic load than in native English, where it usually introduces an exclusive alternative (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973).

With (10), which is taken from a personal letter, the oddness is more clear-cut. Two questions have been coordinated but the first one is a non-polar question while the second one is a yes-no question. This sort of coordination occurs most frequently in a face-to-face interactive discourse where it is often used to join various elements because the speaker wishes to ward off competition for the floor by indicating that he has more to say. A similar feature, called pre-pausal conjunction, is noted by Crystal and Davy (1975) in native English conversation. But its use in the written mode in native English is virtually unknown and thus emphasises the oddness of the present example.

The rest of the examples follow the same pattern: in each case a polar question is coordinated with what appears to be a statement, with the aid of or. Here or retains the function it has in English in that it primarily introduces an exclusive alternative. However, the final declarative structure with fallen intonation, when spoken or read, would seem to suggest that the speaker or writer is more certain about the propositional content of that clause or that he prefers that one to hold true. These odd couples are therefore related to the type exemplified by (9), which carries a challenge in the initial clause and a mitigation in the final.

5.2 First language influence and odd couples

The effect a person's first language (L1) has on learning subsequent languages cannot be denied, but the exact nature of this influence is still not fully understood. It is well-known that interlanguage systems exhibit forms which cannot be traced to either the native or target language. Furthermore certain forms are best explained in terms of the interaction between the languages in contact rather than resulting from any one of them. In discussing L1 as a possible source of odd couples, it will be argued that an interlanguage approach is facile and diverts attention from systematic contextual variation which carries social meaning.

5.3 Questions and statements in Ghanaian Languages

In many Ghanaian languages, if not all, word order in yes-no questions and statements tends to be similar, with questions usually signalled either by differences in tone or a question particle or both. (See Dakubu 1988). The following sentences from Akan, the mother tongue of almost half of Ghana's population, illustrate the point.

16 a. Kofi rekɔ Nkran
   b. Kofi is going to Accra.
17 a. Kofi reko Nkran a
   b. Is Kofi going to Accra?

The similarity between the two sentence-types may strike adherents to interlanguage models in general as the source of the "error" in (11-15). Attractive though this explanation may be, it still leaves a number of serious questions unanswered; for example:

(a) Why do Ghanaians correctly construct questions which involve no coordination?

(b) How does one explain the fact that even in coordination the initial question is always correctly formed?

(c) Why do odd couples appear to be restricted to personal letters and conversations between friends?

The aim of asking these questions is not to deny the role of L1 influence in the formation of odd couples, for there may well be a strong relationship between the two. Rather, it is to challenge the adequacy of a rationalist interlanguage explanation. It is argued in this paper that the form and distribution of odd couples are affected to a large extent by the level of formality of the situation in which they are used.

5.4 Coordination and formality

Most studies into linguistic formality do discuss coordination and subordination as correlates of informal and formal discourse respectively (e.g. Biber 1988). However, not much has been written on types of coordination and how they mark texts of different levels of formality. There is the occasional note on pre-pausal conjunction as a feature of casual conversation (Crystal and Davy 1975), but not much else.

There are at least two reasons for this. First, previous studies have been conducted in the framework of grammars of the formal written English, and such reference works usually do not discuss odd couples. Even the comprehensive corpus-based grammars like Quirk et al. (1985) do not pay specific attention to the subject. The Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1990) comments on one type of odd couple in English, the coordination of imperative and declarative constructions, under 'usage notes' rather than as a normal type.

Second, many previous studies appear to be hampered by statistics. Odd couples, even when they occur in speech, are marginal compared with normal ones. Because they do not occur in great numbers, they are not set up as an independent category, but rather counted as instances of coordination, and lose their identity in the process.

The position adopted in this paper is that the presence of a few odd couples is a more reliable indication of informality than a large number of normal coordinations. This statement is made with particular regard to Ghanaian English as exemplified in my corpus, but I suspect that it is also true of other varieties of English, both native and non-native. The observed fact is that whereas normal coordination, together with subordination, does occur in both formal and informal situations, all the recorded instances of odd couples in my sample occurred in informal discourse. Therefore, in terms of hierarchy, odd couples come before normal ones in the description of informal discourse.

5.5 Formality, the vernacular and the standard variety

Quirk has shown in his earlier writings that the notion of standard English does not exclude informal registers. He believes that standard English has a whole range of situational varieties. For many people, however, social interaction with close family members and friends is conducted in the variety they acquired as children or what may be referred to as their 'real first language'. The term vernacular is often used to described this variety.

In a bilingual community such as Ghana, the situation is similar to that in a monolingual society, though complicated somewhat by the use of more than one language. English and the Ghanaian languages share the burden of communication. The former is employed for administrative and academic purposes while the latter are mainly used for social interaction. But where interactants come from different language backgrounds, English is usually used even in informal situations. This form of English is different from the English of the impersonal letter, and academic essay in retaining many characteristics of the Ghanaian languages. The pronunciation and rhythm in particular both bear a remarkable resemblance to Ghanaian languages (see Criper-Friedman 1971, 1990). It is as though, unable to use the vernacular in all informal encounters, the Ghanaian speaker has adapted the English language to his social needs. It is in such situations that odd couples come into their own.

5.6 The social significance of odd couples

To dismiss odd couples as errors or to count them together with normal coordination is to ignore their role in expressing interpersonal meaning. Together with other linguistic features they signal the absence of social distance in interactions between close friends who enjoy the same status in relation to one another. Thus one would not expect odd couples to occur in public addresses, resolutions, and the minutes of a meeting. For these kinds of communication, which are marked by social distance, more native-like norms seem suitable.

In advancing this argument, one must be careful not to confuse people with the relationship that arises between then. Though it is people who use language, the relationship between them greatly influences the language they use. One implication of this is that the variety of English used in informal Ghanaian discourse, of which odd couples are a notable feature, is not restricted to one person or type of person. Speakers who want to express a certain level of solidarity with their addressees use it. Hence English language teachers may use it to fellow teachers or students with whom they are on friendly terms, even if they deny it when their attention is drawn to this fact. Once the right atmosphere of familiarity has been created, every one uses language in the most natural way possible.

6. <u>What is Ghanaian English if not interlanguage?</u>

Though I think what I shall say here applies to Ghanaian English in general, I shall answer this question with particular reference to English as spoken and written by university students of Ghana, which corresponds to Criper-Friedman's (1971, 1990) Type I. She describes this as "socially acceptable, internationally intelligible, Standard English containing fewer local features" (1990: 65). Types II and III show greater deviation from native varieties, being more like Ghanaian local languages. She adds (personal communication) that speakers of higher types use lower types when speaking to speakers of lower types.

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I shall carry this argument further by stating that the English of the Ghanaian university student as a repertoire is composed of different types. He selects from this repertoire the type appropriate to the communicative situation in which he finds himself: Type I, which is more native-like, for formal situations and the other types for less formal situations.

Ghanaian English, therefore, presents a situation significantly different from an interlanguage system. Interlanguage presumes learners abandoning one approximation to the target language in favour of another closer to it. Ghanaian university students are users, not learners. They do not adopt more native-like forms the way learners do, but rather use them as the situation demands and express themselves in a more vernacular-like medium again as the situation demands.

For this sort of variety the term 'interlanguage' is inappropriate. I suggest the alternative 'bilingual variety', which takes into account the fact English is an additional language for the majority of speakers who live in communities where it is as a non-native variety. To take Ghana as an example, the total repertoire of the Ghanaian speaker of English can be described with the aid of the diagram below. According to this diagram, formal interaction in this bilingual system is either carried out in 'pure' GL or English, where pure means with as little codes-witching as possible. Informal interation, the shaded area, on the other hand, is conducted in a mixed GL and English. The exact nature of the 'mixed variety' cannot be discussed here, except to mention that it can be described at all levels of linguistic analysis, i.e. lexical, grammatical and phonological. Features from any of these levels may be exploited depending on the content, participants and role of discourse.

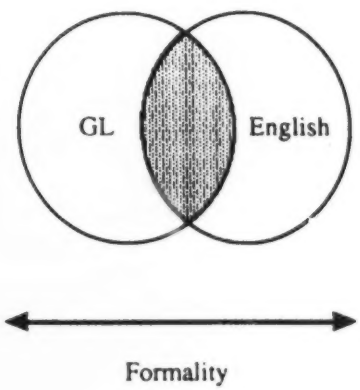

Fig.1: The verbal repertoire of the Ghanaian speaker of English.

To conclude, the bilingual variety used by Ghanaians extends from forms heavily influenced by GL to those that are close to standard native varieties. The issue at stake here is to ensure that the forms observed at the GL end of the cline is not automatically consigned to the dustbin of error but to account adequately for the conditions in which they are used.

7. Implications

The foregoing discussion has implications of a descriptive and pedagogical nature. These will be elaborated below.

7.1 Describing NNE

NNEs have been given some attention, not as deviant forms of native English, but as varieties in their own right, following the work of Kachru (e.g. 1983, 1986, 1987) and others. The result is that we now know far more about NNEs than we did, say, twenty years ago. However, there is still a vast area of research to be covered. Whereas the battle has been won over the use of non-native forms in creative writing, their use in ordinary communication situations is still not favoured. Thus the more unusual varieties represented in the writings of Okara and Tutuola can be upheld in the name of literary creativity but odd couples are yet to be accepted not only by native but also some non-native speakers.

Two reasons account for this. First, the best-known descriptions of English are based on native forms. As yet, there is no recognised grammar of Indian English, for instance, and until the job of codifying NNE has been done, they will continue to be looked down upon. As has been proved over and over again, an adequate description of actual usage must be corpus-based. To the best of my knowledge there is no established corpus of any NNE variety comparable to the Brown Corpus or the London-Lund Corpus, which have greatly facilitated the investigation of native English forms. Such corpora have been collected and analysed by research teams, but it appears that up till now progress in NNE research has been made by researchers working in isolation rather than as a team.

There is an urgent need to pool resources, more so as the majority of NNE speakers live in the less affluent countries of the third world, where research funding is scarce. This need has now been recognised by the Corpus of International English (CIE) project under the directorship of Sidney Greenbaum, but the project is still limited to a few countries, notably India and Nigeria.

The second reason is the commonly-held view that deviation from normal usage is part and parcel of literary writing.

7.2 Pedagogical implications

Following from the lack of codified norms is the necessity to base current pedagogic practice in NNE areas on native models. The argument is often made that teaching native models has the effect of bringing the usage of non-native speakers closer to native norms. The reality is that what is often meant by native model is the highly modified version of the non-native teacher. Non-native usage masquerades as native norms. In addition the teacher's use of the English language is often different from the model he teaches in class. For example, outside the classroom, in an informal situation, teachers and students alike use odd couples without necessarily being aware that this is what they do. Inside the classroom, in a composition class, the teacher penalises their use and rightly so, though the fact is that the opportunity to do this does not often arise since the students are already capable of using odd couples in the appropriate context.

The prevailing state of affairs can best be described with the aid of a diagram such as Figure 2. According to this diagram the student is exposed to native models through listening to the external services of the BBC and the Voice of America as well as through watching television programmes originating from Britain, America and other

native English countries. At the same time, he is influenced by the teacher's version of the standard variety in the classroom. Finally there is the influece of the actual usage around him including that of the teacher when he is not acting his role as English teacher. All this happens against the background of the local languages and culture.

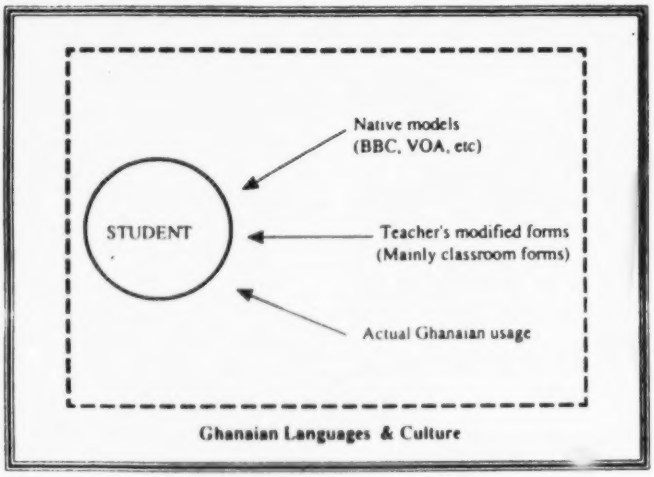

Fig.2: Three competing models of English in Ghana

This state of affairs suggests that it is pointless labelling some aspects of NNE usage as "error" when they are characteristic of everyone's speech.

8. Conclusion

Interlanguage approaches to NNE tend to ignore the fact that certain deviations are motivated by stylistic and social needs. For this reason, a good deal of caution should be exercised in applying such labels as "error", "mistake", and "interlanguage". Teachers have an important role to play in developing a new, healthy attitude to NNE but before then there is a pressing need for intensive research based on actual usage, and eventually leading to the codification of NNEs, involving teams of investigators pooling resources.

Note

1. This is a substantially revised version of a paper I presented to the DAL Staff-Postgraduate seminar under the title: "Odd couples: instances of coordination involving different grammatical structures in Ghanaian English". This version has benefited from the many useful suggestions made at the seminar. I also thank Lindsay Criper-Friedman for much helpful advice.

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